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Sermon – First Congregational Church, Sonoma, CA

September 18, 2005

Readings: Psalm 145: 8 – 21

Matthew 20: 1 – 16

Very high in the Bolivian Andes is the town of Walata Grande. The view from outside of town looking down on Lake Titicaca will take your breath away, if you have any breath left at 10,000 feet above sea level. It is hard to make a living in Walata Grande. The fields surrounding the town grow mostly rocks. I was there in March of 2000 to meet a group of artisans who make musical instruments – panflutes, mocenos, rattles. The sale of the instruments through fair trade stores like the one Brian and I operate supplements their meager farming income. It was suppose to be a quick visit. The group I was traveling with needed to be in La Paz by night fall. So by noon we started to slowly make our way back to our vehicle. But the villagers kept diverting us. After several attempts to make it back to our van we found ourselves being ushered into a meeting room in their community center. The room was lined with benches and a long table ran down the center. We were asked to sit and then they left and shut the door behind them. Several minutes passed and we wondered what was up. The door finally opened and three Bolivian women with bowler hats perched on their heads, long braids swaying down their backs wearing thick multi-layered skirts walked in carrying large, brightly colored fabric bundles. They placed these on the table and as they unknotted the tops mounds of steaming hot potatoes rolled across the table. All kinds of potatoes: red, white, purple. They turned and smiled at us and one of the ladies said, “You may leave when the clothes are empty.” And I was humbled by their hospitality.

Ten years earlier I was in Calcutta, India on the same type of artisan visit trip. My friend Rich and I were invited to dinner at the home of a young, recently married Indian couple. They lived in a high-rise apartment building in the middle of the Calcutta. Iesha was Hindu and her husband a Muslim. We spend the evening looking at wedding pictures and talking about how their families had worked at accepting their marriage.

They were very pleased to be able to host a pair of North Americans in their newly acquired one room apartment. Their bed took up most of the room and as honored guests we sat cross-legged on the bed to eat the delicious vegetarian meal Iesha had prepared for us. At the beginning of the meal she handed us each a Thumbs Up, the Indian cola drink in cute little 6 ounce bottles. It took about two swallows to finish the contents. Iesha immediately noticed that Rich had finished his drink and asked if he would like another. Mine was getting low and when she asked if I would care for a second I thought “oh, why not?” and said yes. Iesha smiled, turned to her husband and nodded. He smiled back, picked up his motorcycle helmet and walked out the door. Five minutes later he was back with two more bottles of Thumbs Up. And I was humbled by their hospitality.

In March of 2003, when the bombs started falling in Iraq, I was in Kathmandu, Nepal. There were 12 of us who had started our trip three weeks earlier at the southern tip of India and slowly traveled north visiting artisan groups along the way. We were tired, we were anxious. We weren't sure how our flights home were going to be effected. One of the women received an email from her five and seven year-old sons saying it was time for her to come home now. But we had one more day in Nepal and one more group to visit. As I climbed into the van that morning I thought about how unfair it was to the organization we were going to see. We were not going to be giving them our full attention. The van started out and we made our way to the outskirts of town. The road lost its pavement and went down to one lane as we started winding up the mountain. Eventually we stopped, the door opened and we all crawled out. Down the steep slope clinging to the side of the mountain were the buildings of the New SADLE Leprosy Rehabilitation Center, our destination for the day. We met with the director of the program who shared that leprosy is now 100% curable but the stigma of the disease keeps the patients at New SADLE from being able to return to their villages. Our tour that day included their tiny one room medical clinic, a day care center, several different work areas where patients were weaving, making batik cards or carving. On our way to see the retirement building where the older patients lived we walked through the kitchen facilities – a large, mostly bare room with a cement floor and walls, a single spigot coming out of the wall and several large pots standing on the floor. It was then that it hit me. We were going to be invited to lunch at the leprosy center. Now, my head said this was just fine. My heart and my stomach did not agree. We

continued on our tour and saw the rest of the grounds and then, indeed, we were called to lunch. We made our way back to the kitchen. The room had been transformed. Our dining area had huge open windows where we could look down the mountain, across the valley and up the other side to the foothills of the Himalayas. The table was set with mounds of rice, chicken curry, vegetables and dhal. It smelled delicious as we were welcomed to the table. The doctor had overseen the entire preparation to make sure the sensitive stomachs of her visitors would not be upset in any way. It was the most incredible meal I had during the entire trip. And once again I was humbled by their hospitality.

This morning's scripture likens the kingdom of heaven to a generous landowner. I can't help but relate to the laborer in this parable who is hired at 5 o'clock yet receives a full day's wage. God has blessed me with possessions and opportunities far beyond most in the world, though I am certainly no more deserving and have not worked harder or longer. And then, when I meet those who have worked harder and longer they aren't grumbling, as they did in the parable, but instead heap their gracious hospitality on me. It is through their extravagant actions that I can come to more fully understand the welcoming kingdom of heaven.

I come home from my every other year sojourns to countries far away wanting to find big ways to make the world better now. I want to respond to the hospitality I've been given. But the kingdom of heaven is not about big it's about faithful. And while society tries to tell me that big is better other parables tell me that a little leaven will raise the bread and a tiny mustard seed will grow into something larger. It's hard for me to understand God's upside down kingdom, so sometimes God has to give me my own parables:

My first trip outside the United States was to Bangladesh. In the capital of Dhaka is the office headquarters for Mennonite Central Committee, the job creation organization I was visiting. This program was staffed by North American volunteers. The day I visited there was no one there but we received the obligatory office tour anyway. We moved from empty desk to empty desk and were told where each person was and the job they did. At one point I leaned over one of the empty desks to get a better look at a paper tacked on a bulletin board. The paper had a handwritten cartoon on it. It

showed a great big vat and leaning against it was a small, rickety ladder. Climbing up the ladder was a little man and in his hand was a tiny eye dropper. The vat was labeled “Bangladesh”. The eye dropper was labeled Mennonite Central Committee. I was devastated. Here was a volunteer, giving three years to work in Bangladesh and feeling like they were doing less than an eyedropper’s worth of good in a huge bucket of need. I came home from that trip with many encouraging job creation stories to share but the memory of that cartoon haunted me and I told no one about it for two years. All the while wondering if all my work, too, was only a drop in the bucket.

I was living in an older apartment at that time and the kitchen sink was one of the large, undivided porcelain kinds. So I did my dishes in a smaller plastic tub. One evening I finished my dishes, poured out the water, placed the tub back in the sink, turned out the light and went to bed – not realizing I had left the faucet dripping very slightly. The next morning I pitter-pattered back into the kitchen and switched on the light just moments before the tub was going to overflow. I burst into tears.

All those drops, added together, filled my kitchen tub.

All our drops, added together, can fill the bucket of need.

Let us pray: O gracious God, give us strength and wisdom and encouragement as we each find ways to add our drops to the needs of our world.